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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the change experienced by mothers participating in the Mother-Child Education Program (MOCEP) in Turkey, which is provided in adult education centers in collaboration with the Ministry of National Education and the Mother-Child Education Foundation. MOCEP targets both the child and the child's immediate environment and aims to foster cognitive and psychosocial development in the home environment. The main aim of this study was to explore the experiences, feelings, and perspectives of mothers through a qualitative approach. Individual interviews with program participants, focus groups, and researcher observations provided the data. As quotes from the interviews reveal, mothers indicated a positive change in their behavior, self-esteem, and child-rearing attitudes because of the program. Mothers reported listening to their children more and avoiding negative discipline methods. They also believe their children and husbands behave more positively because of the program's influence. (EV)

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MOTHERS SPEAKING: A STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERS WITH MOTHER-CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAM

AYLİN KOÇAK – SEVDA BEKMAN

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MOTHERS SPEAKING: A STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCE OF MOTHERS WITH MOTHER-CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAM

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This study is concerned with finding out the change experienced by mothers participating at Mother-Child Education Program (MOCEP), which is carried out in adult education centers in collaboration with Ministry of National Education and Mother-Child Education Foundation. MOCEP targets both the child and the child's immediate environment, and aims to foster cognitive and psychosocial development in the home environment.

The main aim of this study is to get the experiences, feelings and perspectives of mothers through a qualitative study.

The researcher participates at all the meetings of one group of mothers. The number of participants is between 15-25. The individual interviews, which are carried out right after the termination of the program by the researcher, are the main source of data. Besides, there are two focus interviews which are carried out in groups of 6-7 mothers as the program continues. The researcher keeps a diary during the program that provides insights into the experience of attending and practicing the skills learned as a mother.

The changes in the mother, the child and their relationship will reveal invaluable feedback about the program, which have not been available through quantitative studies until now.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to find out how the mothers participating in Mother-Child Education Program (MOCEP) experienced the program. In order to learn about their experience, the effects of the program on the mothers, on their children and on their husbands were the main concern.

Objective methods have already displayed the effectiveness of the program. However, no qualitative study was done until now which was why this study was initialized. The method of qualitative research also allowed for different and more detailed responses from mothers concerning their feelings, experiences and perspective.

THE MOTHER-CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAM – BACKGROUND

Mother-Child Education Program started in 1982, based on the research project entitled "Turkish Early Enrichment Project", (Bekman 1998, 1990; Kağıtçıbaşı (1991); Kağıtçıbaşı, Sunar and Bekman (1988). The evaluation of the project was carried out and both the short term and the long term results were found to be promising.

After the changes in the content and duration of the program, in 1993, a foundation named Mother-Child Education Foundation was established to fund and expand this program on nationwide.

Starting from 1993, MOCEF has been operating in collaboration with the Ministry of National Education and the General Directorate of Social Welfare and Child Protection Agency of the Prime Minister's Office. Since 1993 up to 1999, MOCEP reached 20421 children and 41042 mother-child pairs. MOCEP is now a nationwide program which is implemented in 59 cities in collaboration with the Ministry of National Education.

HOW MOTHER-CHILD EDUCATION PROGRAM WORKS

The program has both the mother and the child as the target, and aims to improve the immediate environment of children from disadvantaged environments by providing them with early enrichment. The overall development of the child is sought for through enhancing cognitive and psycho-social development in the home environment by aiming at the mother.

The program, which continues for 25 weeks is realized through weekly meetings that last about three hours each. The program is free of charge and every mother who has a child at age 6 and who is willing to participate is accepted. Weekly meetings are done in adult education centers in each district of participating provinces. Each group has about 20-25 mothers. Adult education teachers, trained by Mother-Child Education Foundation staff, lead the meetings.

The Mother-Child Education Program has three components. Mother Enrichment Program aims to inform mothers about the social and personality development of the child. Another aspect enhances the cognitive development of the child, which is done with the mothers every week and then mothers go over the daily exercises with their children at their homes. The final part informs mothers about health and family planning. Thus, the intervention aims at both fostering the development of the child and empowering the mother. Their strenghts at both the individual and the family level are emphasized and supported. It is a multipurpose program in the sense that it combines family planning, mother-child health, nutrition and school programs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Choice of target group

The site of this study was one group of mothers participating in the Mother-Child Education Program in İstanbul.

24 mothers participated in the program at the beginning. 5 mothers left during the program because of family reasons.

Almost all the mothers, except two, were housewives and the majority (14) had only primary school education. The mothers' ages ranged between 23-40. When the fathers were considered, the majority (12) had only primary school education, their ages ranging between 29-44. Fathers mainly had skilled or semi-skilled jobs like waiter, driver or worker .

The families were mainly nuclear families who were of rural origin. 12 mothers migrated to urban center within the last 10 years, whereas others

have been living in İstanbul for longer periods. The majority of the families live in apartment flats situated in a low-income area of İstanbul.

INSTRUMENTS

Participant observation, focus and individual interviews were used in this study.

Observation

The researcher attended all the meetings starting from the very first day both as an observer and as a participant as the researcher also had a child who was 6 years old. Observation was done by the researcher in the group meetings for 25 weeks. As an observer, the researcher tried to observe the initial status of the mothers as well as the change they experience and the reasons for this change. What the mothers learned and how they use what they had learned, how they applied this knowledge to their life and relationships with their children and husbands were important points to consider.

There were two types of interviews, focus and individual interviews.

Focus interviews

Two focus interviews which were carried out in 2 groups of about 6-7 mothers were held as the program was still going on. The aim of these focus interviews were to find out the effectiveness of the topics of mother enrichment component and each one lasted about two hours. The researcher asked open-ended questions to talk about the topics that were discussed in the previous weeks. The purpose was to obtain high quality data in a social context where participants could express their own views in the context of the views of others. All four of the focus interviews were recorded.

Individual interviews

In-depth individual interviews with open-ended questions were chosen for the study, as this method of data gathering gave the mothers the opportunity to tell about their own experiences and thoughts.

All the interviews were conducted in the homes of the mothers on a one-to-one basis right after the termination of the program. This enabled the women to discuss their experiences and opinions.

The individual interviews primarily focused on the changes experienced by the mothers, rather than the children, and mainly dealth with the following areas: Relationship of the mothers with significant others in her life such as with their husbands, children, relatives. Another point of focus was on the perceptions and self esteem of the mothers. Besides, questions about whether the program made a difference in the child's life, being the main concern of the intervention strategies, and in the family's life were asked, such as mother's child-rearing techniques and interaction between mother and child. Finally, perspectives of mothers about the professionals and the program were sought for.

On average, it took about an hour to go through the questions. The interview was recorded, which enabled the researcher to focus on attentive listening and questioning. Besides, worthwhile comments of the mothers could be reproduced verbatim through the use of a recorder.

After the termination of data collection, there was a focus on classifying and categorizing. The analysis still goes on as the individual interviews have been completed just a short time ago.

RESULTS OF THE STUDY

Changes in the mothers- towards children

Mothers indicated that they have changed since the beginning of the program.

The most important change took place within the first weeks of the program when mothers realized that their children do understand a lot and when they started considering them as individuals. This led to a change in the behaviour of mothers in the way that they let their children speak and most important of all, they learned to listen to their children, whereas before mothers considered their children too small to talk and listen to.

"I wanted her to listen to me. I did not think she had a right. Now I can listen to her more. I have accepted that she can also have some rights. Before the program, I did not give her that right, I wanted her to listen to me thinking that she was just a kid but I have changed this idea."

"We learned how to listen and how to talk ."

"We saw him as a child, we used to say sit down, shut up all the time. Now I listen to him."

Besides, after having learned what their children can do at that age, mothers started giving responsibilities to their children, letting them help with the house chores. Mothers stated that they do not expect their children to be perfect any more as they have learned what and how children can do when their age is taken into consideration. Although mothers used to get angry and critisize their children's personality when they were incapable of doing a job, now they stated being more patient and tolerant.

"I did not allow my children to take responsibility. I was opposing my husband too saying that I could do everthing. For example I used to dress and feed my son as if he could not do. But now he does these himself."

The behaviour of the mothers changed in the way that they decreased using negative discipline methods. Many mothers stated that they have stopped beating their child, whereas some others said that they are trying to control themselves. Instead of beating their child, almost all the mothers started talking to their children, explaining why his/her behaviour is wrong to the child. Mothers stated that instead of shouting immediately, they try to understand what the problem is and try to solve it by talking. Some of the mothers started setting rules of behaviour beforehand.

"When I behave children badly, when I shout them angrily, I remember what we have talked about in the group."

"I used to beat my daughter a lot. Now it is almost finished."

Most of the mothers started spending more time with their child, trying to listen to and answer the questions of the child even when they have housework to do.

All the mothers learned to be careful about keeping promises whereas before the program they did not pay attention to it as they did not consider their children "an individual".

"Before I did not pay attention to the promises I had made but now I either don't promise anything or when I do, I do everything to keep it."

Mothers reported changes in their relationships with their children in a positive way. As mothers started to listen to their children, their dialogue was better, they became closer like friends. Mothers described the relationship as one that is more calm and better.

"When we treated her with more tolarance and closer, my child in turn becomes tolerant. However when I talk to her shouting, she used to answer me in the same way. Still there are times when she answers shouting. When I warned her not to shout, she tells me that I used to shout, too. The child has the mother as the role model so whatever I do to my child, I get the same response."

"Before she used to hide certain things from me because of the fear that I would beat her. Now we can talk more."

Changes in the mothers- towards husbands

Mothers reported changes in their relationships with their husbands. Mothers stated that they changed their way of speaking to their husbands, which became nice and soft. This led to more communication with the husbands, which resulted in better harmony.

"I became more positive, more patient, more tolerant towards my husband."

"After I had participated in the program, I realised that some of my behaviours were wrong and that I should deal with things talking, not shouting and arguing. When I changed, he changed also leading to a more peaceful family environment."

"When I got angry I used to sulk. The other person did not know why I was angry, or what happened. But now instead of being silent and getting angry, I try to talk more about the things that bother me. I am working on it."

Changes in the mothers- perception of self

Mothers stated that they had more confidence in themselves, believing that they are more efficient and qualified in their child's education and upbringing. They now know their faults and what things they should change. Some mothers described themselves as being more optimistic and happier. Some mentioned their intentions to further continue their education.

"Before this program I could not talk about the things I like. Now I can say that I can express myself better."

"My self-esteem improved. Although I am not perfect, I can be more helpful than I used to be. At least I have done something for my children."

"I am thinking of continuing my education. I could not dare it before the program believing that I could not do it. But now I have the courage, I believe that I can do it."

"The day I received my certificate, I felt that I was someone very different, very important as if I did something very useful."

Change in children- cognitive development

The children were reported to know the numbers, letters, colours and geometrical shapes. Some mothers stated that their children learned how to draw.

"She learned counting and most of the letters. She learned the geometrical shapes, too. Next year we won't have too much of a difficulty. İn school."

As to the language development, the speech and vocabulary of children improved a lot. Mothers said that their children could tell stories by looking at the pictures. On the other hand, as the mother and the child followed a daily routine of study time, the children were reported to get used to a study habit.

"He learned how to use the pencil, how to differentiate things. He learned telling stories. Besides, he now has a responsibility, he says "Mom, let's do my lesson, let's study"."

"His vocabulary improved through the exercises we were doing. I was happy to see that he learned the numbers, colours and shapes."

Change in children- socio-emotional development

Mothers mentioned that their children became more respectful to the parents as well as to other people like paying more attention to polite manners. The children had an increased sense of responsibility- reminding his/her mother about the study time as well as tidying up his/her room and toys.

"He used to listen to me because of fear. Now I have seen that he listens when I talk, not when I beat him. We became closer."

"My child became more understanding towards me when I presented her alternatives. When she asks for something that I cannot buy, she does not insist on it as she used to."

"Now he is more calm. When he messes up, he tries to tidy it up, he tries not to make me sad."

Change in fathers- towards children

Fathers were reported to be more interested in their children, spending more time with them. All of the fathers who had talked with their viwes about the subjects learned in the program changed their behaviour in a positive way. In the families where fathers did not listen to their wives about the program, no change was reported. Fathers also started paying attention to keep their promises.

"He used to read the handouts. He started spending some time with his children. Before, on Sundays for example, he used to say that he had only that day to relax and wanted the children to be quiet. Now even on Sundays or whenever he has some time, he takes his children out. At home he is interested in what they are doing. He reads them books. He talks with them about their homework. He became much closer."

"His behaviour has changed. He is now more tolerant to our daughter. There are times when he warns me if I do or say something wrong. He listens to her now. He did not use to play with her before the program saying that he was tired. Now they play together, they even do gymnastics together."

"He used to read the handouts I was bringing home. He used to beat our eldest son for not studying his lessons. He stopped it now, he only interferes verbally. He became more calm and understanding."

IMPLICATIONS

The answers of the mothers indicate that there is a change in the mothers' behaviour, self-esteem and child-rearing attitudes caused by the program. Mothers reflect this change onto their children and husbands. In turn, the children and the husbands behave differently to the mothers being affected by the change in mothers.

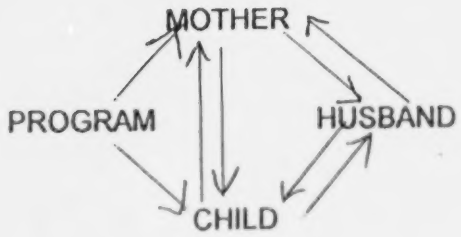
On the other hand, children were seen to have been influenced directly from the program through the application of cognitive development component.

These changes lead us to the conclusion that this program which aims at the mother and the child is influencial on the whole family, helping each member change in different degrees. Thus, these children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds who cannot receive any kind of center-based education benefited from the program. The benefit was actually doubled in the sense that both the father, other children than the target child and especially the mother changed through the program.

"At least I feel happy for my child. Let's assume my neighbour's child attends a kindergarten, he will surely learn certain things. If I had not participated in the program, my child would begin without knowing anything and he would feel the lack of it. I am very happy for the only fact that I prevented my child from the possibility of feeling inferior."

"The program was most useful to me. After I have learned and implemented things, my children and my husband benefited. My husband experienced its positive effects. After we learned about how to raise a child, it was reflected onto our children."

"I was the one who benefited the most from the program. Then, I tried to reflect this change at home."



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